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ABSTRACT

This paper describes three non-traditional higher education outcomes assessment models and identifies common characteristics of successful models of this type. Institutions considering how to meet state, national, and accrediting agency mandates have two kinds of non-traditional approaches available: formative and summative assessment. Formative assessment helps institutions make internal adjustments to student programs before the student completes the program. Summative assessment is that which evaluates the overall effectiveness of programs and services. A third emerging model is the Assessment Center model in which the testing and evaluating procedures for an institution are coordinated. Common features of assessment models all designed to meet the unique needs of individual institutions include evaluation of: clearly stated institutional mission and goals developed by the institutional community; in-place formal systems procedures; faculty commitment; administrative support; feedback from students and graduates; student-faculty contact beyond class; assessment focus on student completion; feedback to students; and commitment from chief leadership personnel. The paper closes with a discussion of the historical context of assessment pressures in higher education and a look at why assessment is now being mandated. Contains 18 references. (JB)

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A Discussion of Non-Traditional Outcomes Assessment Models

Presented at the Forty-eighth Annual National Conference of Academic Deans
Held at Oklahoma State University
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July 24, 1994

Today, I would like to accomplish three things: (1) Describe three non-traditional outcomes assessment models; (2) identify common characteristics of successful non-traditional outcomes assessment models; and (3) pose questions for thought concerning why outcomes assessment is being mandated.

As institutions consider how they intend to meet state, national, and accrediting agency mandates which require them to assess their performance in accomplishing their stated mission, a number of non-traditional alternative assessment methods are available. These alternatives can be classified into two assessment categories; formative and sumative assessment.

Formative assessment provides assistance to institutions in making necessary internal adjustments to student programs before the student completes the program. Sumative assessment provides a means of evaluating the overall effectiveness of institutional programs and services.

Hay (1990) describes a formative assessment program implemented by Central College in Iowa, DePaw University in Indiana and several other well known colleges. The formative assessment program is called Communication Across the Curriculum. The programs require students to complete a designated group of courses which emphasize the development of their abilities to speak, discuss, interview and debate in addition to the subject matter content normally included in the courses. These communication activities become the means for learning about other disciplines and promoting critical thinking, goals established as expected outcomes of graduates of the participating colleges. Through this program students demonstrate communication competence (and are assessed) in a variety of settings outside of traditional communication courses. Hay suggests this assessment model can be successfully used in the assessment of other institutional goal areas.

Successful "Across the Curriculum" assessment programs share a number of commonalities. First, extensive training must be provided to the faculty in all departments of the institution to provide them the capability of structuring assignments appropriate to the goals to be assessed, and the students being taught. Faculty must also be trained in methods of providing feedback and evaluations which will support the development of the goals to be accomplished by the Across the Curriculum" program assessment.

In the programs described by Hay (1990) several weeks of summer workshops are devoted to faculty in service. Some programs provide students with consistent feedback about their performances through the use of locally developed forms. These forms are then used as records of student achievement to fulfill assessment mandates.

Secondly, successful "Across the Curriculum" assessment programs provide support for students. Centers are developed which are fully equipped and staffed with professionals trained in the specific techniques so that they provide assistance in fulfilling their "Across the Curriculum" assignments. This requires that faculty be sensitive to the apprehension of some students so that the students may receive the assistance they need.

Finally, successful "Across the Curriculum" assessment programs must have the administration necessary to ensure that the courses are actually offering the stated goal opportunities for students and that students are completing the requisite assignments and courses that develop the stated "Across the Curriculum" goals. Though a faculty committee usually

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oversees these curricular concerns, they are provided administrative support, essential if these programs are to be used for meeting assessment mandates.

Another non-traditional model used in conducting formative assessment is the Assessment Center model. The Assessment Center model is becoming common. In this model centers are developed which coordinate the testing and evaluating procedures for the institution. The center is responsible for administering the various assessments and keeping appropriate records concerning student progress.

Some assessment center models are patterned after the business and military community. In some businesses and the military assessment centers have been established. The function of these centers is to evaluate individuals for their potential to accomplish various purposes.

Successful assessment center models first determine the knowledge and abilities that students would be expected to possess or demonstrate during and upon completion of degree requirements. Once such a determination has been made, the faculty would then design appropriate activities and communicate the criteria related to the outcomes. When students report to the center they become involved in activities which have been identified as promoting the knowledge and abilities the students would be expected to demonstrate during and at the time of completing their degree program. One key component of Assessment Center models is the need to provide accurate feedback to the students concerning their performance and to require students to be involved in self assessment on predetermined criteria. The Assessment Center is responsible for keeping the relevant stimuli for each simulation, establishing activities, scheduling students for assessment and feedback and informing faculty of student results.

As can be seen, the formative model requires extensive training, coordination and commitment from the faculty. One could easily make the case that the only difference between what traditionally is accomplished through instruction and student services is identical to the "Across the Curriculum" and Assessment Center model with the exception that these non-traditional models provide accountability in a consistent way. That is, they force institutional goal development and assessment to become operationally one of the most important functions of an institution of higher education.

In 1989, the University of Central Texas, in preparation for a Southern Association mandate concerning assessment, developed a sumative assessment model to be used as part of the institution's self study (Dixon, 1990). The model was based upon: (1) goals to be implemented the following year; (2) goals which were in place at the time the model was developed; and, (3) the university's mission statement. The model was based upon the assumption that students and graduates know best whether the University was accomplishing it's mission and goals. Therefore, feedback was provided by students and graduates through the use of a survey instrument developed by University faculty, staff and administration. The instrument asked students and graduates to grade the University in the areas of institutional development (fund raising), academic programs, financial aid and other student service areas, including business, admissions and recruiting office areas.

Results of the survey were then analyzed and recommendations developed. These recommendations were distributed campus wide with the various entities encouraged to implement appropriate changes.

Other non-traditional assessment models exist which base their development upon identifying the primary consumer of higher education (The Statewide..., 1987). For example, in situations where the primary consumer is the student, the educational experience is intended to accomplish one of three goals; (1) lead to a richer, more satisfying and fulfilling life; (2) open opportunities for further professional training; or, (3) prepare for greater employment opportunity. When the primary consumer is the employer the institution focuses assessment upon their success in teaching intellectual skills and technological knowledge to develop the graduate into a more employable and productive worker. When the state or public at large is the primary consumer, the institution strives to concentrate education toward; (1) the productivity and welfare of its citizens;

or (2) the students ability to participate in the social and political life of the community.

In each case mentioned above, the assessment needs differ according to the product desired and as would be expected, would be require differing measures. After reviewing these and similar models, several common descriptors appear to be evident in most all assessment models. Perhaps as we struggle to meet the mandates of the various forces influencing our institution, it would benefit us to keep these common descriptors in mind. In this way we can design the best possible model to meet the unique needs of our institution and the forces mandating outcome assessment.

These common descriptors include:

(1) Clearly stated institutional mission and goals which have involved the total institutional constituency in their development
(2) A formal systems procedure which has been developed prior to implementing the outcome assessment model.
(3) Faculty commitment which has been established from the beginning of institutional model development
(4) There has been administrative support provided which has been assigned responsibility for coordinating and implementing the ongoing outcome assessment
(5) Student and graduates are meaningfully involved in providing feedback about programs and services
(6) There is a high degree of faculty effort to assist students outside of class
(7) The outcome assessment methods used focus upon each individual completing the program
(8) Students are provided open feedback and encouraged to complete self assessments, even after graduation
(9) The chief executive officer of the institution demonstrate commitment to outcomes assessment and provides the leadership and resources necessary to carry out the commitment.

At various times during the past 20 years different themes have influenced policies and practices at institutions of higher education (Kuh, 1981). In the early 60's it was excellence, the late 60s and early seventies access. The theme for the 90s promises to be accountability. Assessment of student outcomes is not new. During the 19th century, colleges required a fourth year oral examination as a method of validating the learning of graduates. We have all given mid term and final examinations. We have all required students to write research papers and complete clinical or internship semesters. All of these measures are in truth outcomes assessment- to be used to determine whether students should continue or complete a program. Why then is assessment being mandated? I suggest to you that the answers to the following questions may provide answers to the question of why is outcome assessment being mandated.

1. Do all of your faculty provide feedback as well as grades for student work?
2. Does your administration take a proactive look at the size of classes for each subject area?
3. When was the first year your institution asked graduates what they believe about the education they received from your institution?\
4. Does your institution have a brochure describing, clearly for the prospective student, the strength of your institution and the characteristics of the student who is most likely to benefit from completing you programs?
5. When is the last time you invited a senator or other influential politician to serve as on your institutional self study team?
6. Has your institution studied non-traditional methods of awarding college credit which might be appropriate for your programs?
7. When is the last time your institution considered, without external pressures, the

feasibility of identifying ways to reduce tuition?

8. When is the last time your institution has proactively considered a mission change?
9. Finally, When is the last time you publicly announced the results of an outcome assessment of the higher educational support the senators and congressmen of your district provide higher education?

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